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To Join or Not to Join

*Wrestling With Fear and Duty,
Teenaged JROTC Student
Considers Life in Military*

By ANNA WILDE MATTHEWS
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

POMONA, Calif. — Early on the morning of Sept. 11, Michael Madrigal's mother came into his room as he was watching the World Trade Center burn on TV.

"I know what you're thinking," said Judith Madrigal. "You're not joining the Army."

Her 17-year-old son didn't reply.

But Mr. Madrigal, a senior at Pomona High School who has spent four years in the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps in this suburb east of Los Angeles, is drawing closer to the moment when he will have to answer one of the toughest questions a young person can face: Does he want to join the military at a time when the U.S. is embarking on a war?



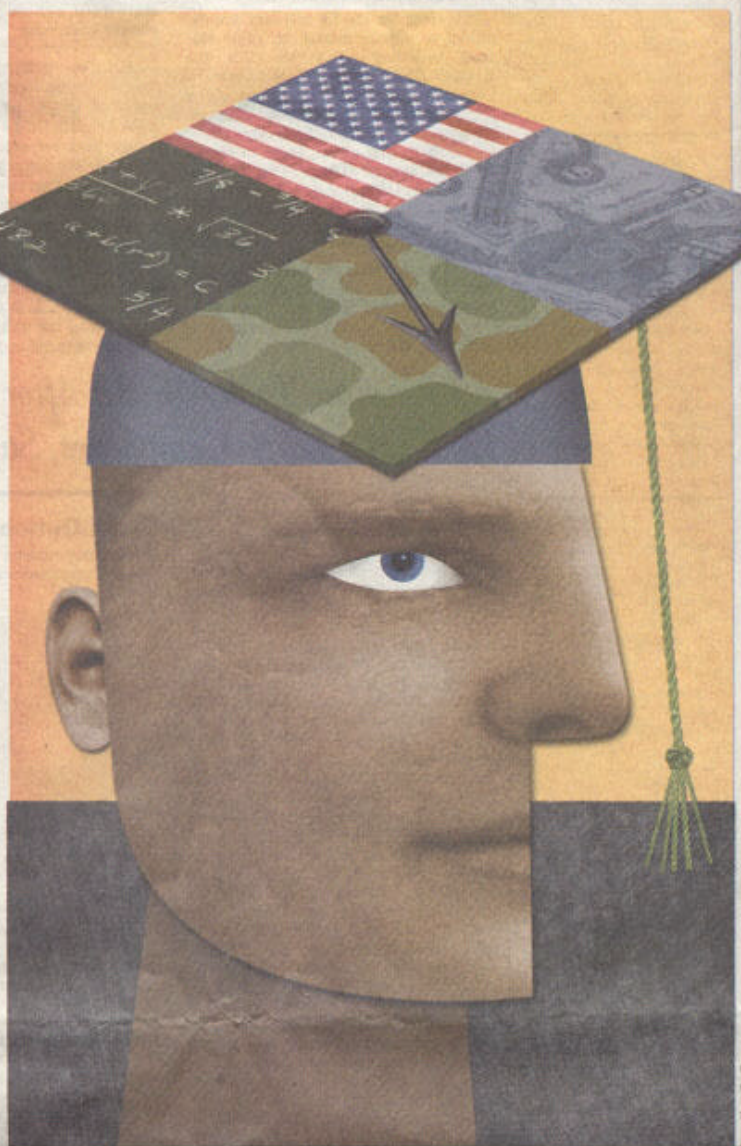
Michael Madrigal

For Mr. Madrigal and his teenaged and twentysomething peers, it is a dilemma for which they have had little preparation. He is a member of Generation Y, the largest group of young Americans since their baby boomer parents. Having grown up in an age of peace and affluence, this group until now has been known for its voracious consumerism. Companies in the clothing, consumer products and entertainment industries have done back flips trying to win them over.

Now it is the government's turn. Having declared war, President Bush and his administration are faced with courting a generation that has grown up in a time when notions of patriotism seemed remote. If the war on terrorism becomes an ongoing presence in American life—one that could require a continuing pool of manpower—it will partly depend on the willingness of today's young people to play a role.

Despite Gen Y's reputation for being coddled, membership in junior ROTC programs over the last five years has risen more than 10%, to 441,520 students from 388,446, partly due to increased federal funding which has allowed more schools to join. Unlike college ROTC, the junior programs, which are offered by the Navy, Army, Air Force and Marines through

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Japan News/Beck

One Teen's Quandary: Should He Join the U.S. Military?

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high schools, aren't designed to funnel students directly into the armed forces but rather to focus on general citizenship and military-related skills.

Michael Madrigal, a son of Costa Rican immigrants, is the kind of teenager likely to be at the focal point of the military's future recruiting drives. He is a company commander in the 250-person JROTC chapter at Pomona High, which is set amid the vast, fast-growing suburban sprawl an hour east of Los Angeles. He likes the discipline and challenge of the JROTC rifle drill team. But his post-graduation plans have mostly been centered on attending college, with an eye toward becoming a pastry chef.

Mr. Madrigal's parents sought to shelter him growing up, while putting him on a path to succeed later in life. Mrs. Madrigal, who owns a bridal shop, says that her kids call her "superprotective," in part because she denied them toy guns and soldiers when they were younger. She and her husband, a welder, put Michael in a program for gifted children, though he proved too restless for bookwork and gravitated to sports. A die-hard fan of the Los Angeles Lakers, he is a passionate collector of basketball trading cards, picking up some of his 5,000-card stash on eBay and storing them in a special safe.

When Mr. Madrigal signed up for JROTC during his freshman year of high school, his aim was only to get out of gym class. But he found that he liked it. His mother was pleased by his choice of activity. "They teach discipline, good things," she says in an interview conducted in Spanish, adding that JROTC is far better than other common teenaged pursuits.

Over time, members of the JROTC battalion became Mr. Madrigal's closest friends. The unit's teacher, Sgt. Maj. Raúl Durán, a 30-year Army veteran, worked to foster comradeship by organizing social events like weekend laser-tag outings for the students.

During the summer of 2000, Mr. Madrigal spent two weeks visiting Camp Pendleton, north of San Diego. The teenager stayed on the base, slithered under barbed wire and climbed a 15-foot wall to complete an obstacle course, all wearing full military gear and a 20-pound backpack. He admired the real soldiers as they marched in formations on the parade ground: "They were so steady. Everything's down to the detail."

By the time he entered his junior year, Mr. Madrigal was sure he wanted to be part of the military, perhaps in the reserves. He and close friend Teddy Javinar Jr., another senior who is now the battalion commander of the Pomona High JROTC, would compare the tough training requirements of each service. They played games like "Army Men" and "Silent Scope" on Mr. Madrigal's PlayStation module.

"He'd just joke around, like, 'what if we go to the front line?'" says Mr. Javinar. "But that's just talk."

In fact, Mr. Madrigal did have some doubts about signing up for active-duty military service. Last May, a cousin who is in the Army visited wearing a cast. He said he broke his arm while fixing a tank. "That's too much," Mr. Madrigal says. "I haven't broken a bone in my body and I don't want to start now." Mr. Madrigal instead devised a plan in which he would enroll in college and join the reserves.

That is where things stood on Sept. 11, when the prospect of serving in the military, even in the reserves, suddenly became more serious. As Mr. Javinar says, now "it could be the real thing."

But as Mr. Madrigal watched the World Trade Center attacks play out on television,

he started to waver on even entering the reserves, fearing that he would be quickly activated for more serious duty. Nearly one-fifth of all the troops deployed in the Middle East during the Persian Gulf war were called to active duty from reserve units.

Mr. Madrigal says he was unsure that he was ready to go overseas, and the reserves no longer seemed like a limited commitment of just a few weekends a month. At the same time, he began taking a closer look at the world he lives in now. "I was admiring everything around me," he says. "Like, if I do go, maybe I won't see them or see this again." He was thinking: "What happens if I do get shipped off to Afghanistan or whatever, and they start shooting?"

"That really just scared me," he says. But Mr. Madrigal kept remembering Sgt. Maj. Durán's talks about commitment. He didn't want the terrorists to scare him off his plans. Seeing the flags go up around his community also made him think, "People buy the flags, and it's just like, whoopee-de-doo," he says. "My standards are higher than theirs."

Mr. Madrigal's debate has mostly played out in his own head. He hasn't discussed it at length with the people close to him, even his mother, who is adamant that he not go off to war. "I don't like the Army," she says. "When a boy can have a career, he should go to university and not to the

Army."

Mr. Madrigal has talked more with Claudia Amezcua, an 18-year-old Pomona High senior who has been his girlfriend since the ninth grade. She's against him enlisting, and says she sometimes thinks about the female heroine of the movie "Pearl Harbor" who watches her boyfriend go off to war. Yet she says she won't stand in his way.

In the early days after the attacks, Mr. Madrigal wanted to do something for victims in New York, and briefly considered volunteering to help firefighters and other workers. He also grew more angry over the terrorism. "I wanted to go get revenge, or something like that," he says.

Though he doesn't have to make a final decision until next spring, Mr. Madrigal says that for now he has decided to stick with his plan to join the Army Reserves—even if it means a quick call-up to the war.

"To me, it's like the whole commitment thing," he says. "It's just something I really can't explain."

Though he's still "petrified" at the idea of combat, he says, "I just wanted to do something for my country" and adds, "That's the risk I'm willing to take." He's scared of something else, too: telling his mother about his plans. He hasn't done that yet.

—Eduardo Porter
contributed to this article.



Claudia Amezcua

LAW

Who May Be Liable for Sept. 11?

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injuries on the planes and on the ground in the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. But it wouldn't be nearly enough to compensate for property damage and business and insurance losses, particularly at the World Trade Center and its surround-

hijacking a dozen jumbo jets en route from the Philippines. Lawyers also are looking at Federal Aviation Administration rules that allow passengers to carry knives with blades less than four inches long on flights. The hijackers are believed to have wielded knives or box cutters

which they used to overpower the pilots.